

YAKIMA HERALD

## Seventh Benton-Franklin judge likely won't take bench for years

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*By Geoff Folsom, Tri-City Herald*

While a bill that would create a seventh judicial position in Benton-Franklin Superior Court appears headed for passage, it might take a couple years before a new judge actually takes the bench.

Gov. Jay Inslee's spokeswoman, Jaime Smith, said this week that the governor plans to sign House Bill 1175, though she wasn't sure when. It passed the Senate April 15 by a 47-1 vote after earlier passing the House. The bill was delivered to Inslee's desk Tuesday.

But the counties won't have enough room in their budget to pay for the new position until at least July 2014, said Pat Austin, Superior Court administrator.

"I'm actually more optimistically thinking it will be 2015," she said.

Austin said the budget for the position requires a "three-legged stool" of approval, with commissioners in both Benton and Franklin counties needing to sign off on it. And since the state pays for the judge's benefits and half the salary, the budget for the judgeship also requires further legislative approval. The judges are paid about \$149,000 a year.

Court officials are working with commissioners on finding the money, Austin said.

Estimates show the new judge would cost the larger Benton County \$54,900 annually and Franklin County \$19,500.

When the new judgeship is added, Austin said it will be the only new position created. Support staff, such as bailiffs and court stenographers, will be shared with other judges.

The Tri-Cities has experienced significant growth in recent years, which has placed more demand on the court system with a larger and more complicated caseload, say officials.

But no new judge positions have been added in about a decade. The formula used by the state shows that the Benton-Franklin court is two judges short of where it should be based on the number of cases it handles, Austin said.

"By the time we get the judge on board, we'll be even further behind," she said.

Superior Court judges handle felony criminal cases, civil lawsuits, divorces, paternity and custody issues.

The bill was sponsored by Republican Sens. Mike Hewitt of Walla Walla and Mark Schoesler of Ritzville and Democratic Sen. Jeanne Kohl-Welles of Seattle.

The House bill was sponsored by Reps. Terry Nealey, Larry Haler, Brad Klippert, Maureen Walsh, Joe Schmick and Susan Fagan. They are all Republicans from the 8th, 9th and 16th legislative districts.